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ABSTRACT

This is a report of a study of safety issues at one urban middle school in New Jersey. The study had four objectives: (1) to identify the safety concerns of the staff and students of the school; (2) to determine effective strategies for improving safety; (3) to ascertain ways to implement strategies for improved safety; and (4) to determine ways to evaluate the strategies and decide their effectiveness. The study was based on the assumption that safety affects the learning environment. A purposive, nonrandom sampling of participants was used, and data were collected through a survey of 50 students, 25 staff members, and 3 administrators. The survey emphasized school safety with regard to hallways and common areas. Analysis shows that students, staff, and administrators agree on issues of safety concerns. The three groups of participants recommended improved hallway supervision and further study on bookbags. Strategies have been implemented to improve safety in the school. The study concludes, among other points, that safety issues in a school encompass the everyday activities that make up the learning environment, and that making schools safe is a joint responsibility that requires a broad-based team approach. (Contains 2 tables and 24 references.) (WFA)

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Effects of Safety on the Learning Environment

ED 471 557

The Effects of School Safety on the Learning Environment of a Middle School

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Pemberton Township School District

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Abstract

This study identified and analyzed the safety concerns of the staff and students of an urban middle school and their impact upon the learning environment. A purposive, nonrandom sampling of participants was used. The survey was given to 50 students, 25 staff, and 3 administrators. Data was collected through the use of a survey distributed to students, staff, and administrators. It emphasized school safety with regard to hallways and common areas. Students and administrators responded with 100% participation; eighty-nine percent of the surveyed staff responded. Analysis showed that students, staff and administrators agreed on issues of safety concern. The 3 groups of participants recommended improved hallway supervision and a further study on bookbags. These strategies were implemented to improve school safety.

The Effects of School Safety on the Learning Environment of a Middle School

Teachers and administrators in America today are bombarded with responsibilities. It seems as though the main purpose of a school in providing instruction to students has been lost in the mire of modern social problems. Within the past few years there has been an onslaught of violence in American schools. The issue of school safety, though always a top priority has taken on a new and frightening urgency. The question remains, how will school safety issues affect the learning environment of a middle school?

Safety is defined as free of danger. There are differing degrees of danger ranging from mildly dangerous to extremely dangerous. Chances are good that the majority of students will not experience extreme danger at their school. It is the daily mildly dangerous situations that occur and impinge upon the learning environment. Safety during the changing of classes with regard to crowded hallways and overloaded backpacks is an issue.

In a middle school with a thousand students, safety is a concern. Students' health and well-being are important to the process of learning. In Maslow's need hierarchy theory, safety and the need to feel secure are secondary only to basic needs like food and water. Before the students can learn, they must first feel safe and secure (Hoy and Miskel, 1996). The hallway is where a breech of security exists in a middle school when students change rooms for every class. Adding to the congestion of the hallway is the overloaded backpack in which students carry their books.

One aspect of this issue is the management of traffic and congestion in the hallways. In addition students are carrying around bulky backpacks and bumping others with them. Exactly how this affected the learning environment and ways to improve the situation were investigated.

It is important for safety issues to be addressed if learning is to take place. An investigation of ways to improve traffic flow and security in the hallways during the changing of classes needs to be conducted. Students must be made aware of the correct way to carry backpacks to avoid bumping others with them. Alternatives to backpacks should be examined.

Purpose

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of safety issues on the learning environment of a middle school. The dependent variable was the learning environment and the independent variable was the safety issues and concerns. The outcome variable was the improvement was achieved as a result of the study. The extraneous variables were the people involved and their behavior. Specifically, the study attempted to answer these questions:

1. According to the students, staff and administrators, what impact, if any, does hallway climate have on teaching and learning?

2. What are the strategies for improvement recommended by the students, staff, and administrators?

Objectives

1. To identify the safety concerns of the staff and students of a middle school.
2. To determine effective strategies for improving safety concerns.

3. To implement strategies for improvement.
4. To evaluate the strategies and decide their effectiveness.

Assumptions

This study was based on the assumption that safety has an effect on the learning environment. With improved safety measures, the learning environment will be enhanced and the possibility of achieving success will be greater for the staff and students.

Delimitations

This study is not about violence with guns and firearms in a school. It is about safety issues in crowded hallways and other areas of a middle school and how this affects the learning environment.

Significance

The staff has gained a benefit from this study because their safety concerns were voiced and solutions can be created from them. The students have also had a benefit because the study will look for ways to improve transitions between classes, making their job easier. The study has given a benefit to the school community as a whole because it will be a safer place as a result.

Review of the Literature

With the ever amounting media attention on schools today it is obvious that there are safety concerns among schools across the nation. Unfortunately the tragically violent cases are sensationalized and catch attention. This attention creates fear and unease and takes away from the purpose of learning. The majority of students will never witness or experience the kind violence that is seen on the news in other schools. The purpose of this review is to analyze the literature related to the impact of safety issues and how they affect the learning environment of a middle school.

Examples of common safety issues in a school are crowded hallways and overloaded backpacks carried by students. The common areas of a school such as the hallways are places where safety concerns exist because of the congestion and crowded conditions (Tolan, 2000). Adding to this are the massive, overloaded backpacks students carry that stick out three feet behind them. Students inadvertently bump others with their backpacks. The backpacks are heavy and solid because they are filled with hardcover textbooks. Being hit with a backpack full of books poses a safety concern especially
when factoring in the crowd of nine hundred plus students who are in the hallway during each class transition. Research has shown that some schools reduce the number of altercations in the halls by eliminating the use of backpacks altogether (Posner, 2000).

What exactly is the definition of school safety? Recent mass homicides on school grounds have only intensified the public concern over school violence. Teachers voice concerns about specific contexts within a school to be areas prone to violence, such as the hallways, cafeteria and other common areas (Saunders, 1994). These same general areas seem to be problems in all schools regardless of grade level. There needs to be more

discussion regarding the meaning of violence to the members of a school community. Before any solutions can be created, the problem must be identified. There are ways of scoring a school's security lapses. In general, security gaps appeared in the common areas of a school (Elliot & Hamburg, 1998). Issues of safety are best dealt with in a proactive manner. There is no guarantee that a measure will work but it is best to go through a series of observations and data collecting before putting any measures in place (Blauvelt, 1978).

Safety and Hallways

The most common school security measure used to prevent violence or other disruptive acts requires school staff, in particular teachers and security staff, to monitor students' movements in and around the school (Posner, 2000). The hallways are areas where many safety risks occur. Assessing the extent of or potential for problems within the hallway is a necessary task. Surveys can provide valuable information about safety hazards in a school and attitudes and beliefs that may indicate a potential for increased problems in the future (Posner, 2000). Looking at school discipline records may also pinpoint problem areas in the school where disturbances occur. Before an effective safe school plan can be created, the architects of the plan must understand the forces that create safe schools (Elliott & Hamburg, 1998).

Planning for School Safety

There is a compelling duty of care that defines the special relationship that exists between students and schools (Elliott & Hamburg, 1998). Establishing a safe school plan is a long-term, systematic, and comprehensive process.

The best safe school plans involve the entire community: teachers, students, parents, law enforcement officials, mental health professionals, business and community leaders, and a wide

array of youth-serving professionals should all be brought to the table. Safe school planning is an inclusive and cooperative activity (Elliott & Hamburg, 1998). It involves three key components: (1) it identifies where you are as a district and community, specifying top concerns and /or issues; (2) it asks where you want to be, and (3) it calls for the development of a plan to deal with the differences between where you are and where you want to be (Elliott & Hamburg, 1998). A main component of planning for a safe school is the management and supervision of student behavior. School systems around the country have implemented a variety of safety procedures that include the following: allowing either clear or mesh backpacks or no backpacks at all, providing students with two sets of textbooks , one for home and one for school, in order to eliminate the need for a backpack at school and also eliminating the use of lockers at all (Astor & Meyer, 2001). Requiring students to leave the backpacks in the lockers will greatly reduce the potential for conflicts and distractions (National School Safety and Security Services, 2001).

Summary and Conclusions

Safety issues in a school today encompass the everyday activities that make up the learning environment. Before undertaking an investigation about safety, the issue itself must first be defined. There are a multitude of possibilities to be addressed and it is best to take the opinions from the school community to interpret what issues are a part of that school.

From this review it can be concluded that hallways and other common areas are a part of this issue as has been defined for the purpose of this review. The best approach is to be proactive with regard to safety in a school. Before taking any action, it is important to investigate what problems exist according to the staff and students. This involves making a

personal and collective commitment toward creating a safe and welcoming school climate. Once the problems are identified, a course of action can be put in place on a trial basis.

Making schools safe is a joint responsibility, requiring a broad-based team with working attitudes that complement a collaborative and cooperative spirit. After time passes the staff and students should give their input about the solution. Given the results of the staff and students' responses, the next step is administrative evaluation. Once the evaluation is completed a plan of action should be put into place that best suits the needs of the students and staff of the school based on the results of the findings. Safe school planning requires continuing attention to and reevaluation of strategies. Evaluation is about making continuing improvements and enhancements to the school environment that are designed to serve and support the success of all children. The quality of the future of education will be dependent on how well educators teach and that is dependent ultimately upon school safety. Safe school planning produces both immediate and long-term benefits, and should be monitored closely.

Method

Context

The study was conducted at the Helen Fort Middle School located in Pemberton, New Jersey. The Pemberton Township school district is located in Burlington County. It is an Abbott district meaning it qualifies for extra government funding due to the lower economic classification of the surrounding community. The range of the population is lower middle class to poor, with almost more than half of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The community of Pemberton is rural, yet there is an influx of urban influence. There are neighborhoods in the township that are notorious for high crime rates and illegal drugs. There are many farms, fields and open spaces. There are two military bases in the area. One is the McGuire Air Force Base and the other is the Fort Dix Army Base. Students from the Fort Dix Base attend the Pemberton Township Schools and the students from the McGuire Base attend a neighboring district. Due to the military transfers, there is a large turnover of students making for a transient district. Within the district, there are eight elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. This study will focus on the middle school which consists of seventh and eighth grade students.

There are approximately 950 students enrolled at the Helen Fort Middle School. Of the population, there are approximately 27% identified as special education students, 5% are identified enrichment or gifted, and the remaining amount consists of basic skills students and regular education students. The average regular class size is 20 to 25 students. The ethnic backgrounds of the students are divided equally between black and white with a smaller percentage of Hispanics and Asians. Biracial families are not uncommon here.

In total there are over one hundred members on the staff at the middle school. There are 82 certified staff members and 50 non-certified staff. There are two assistant principals, one principal, one school resource officer and one school nurse.

Participants

The participants of this study included students, teachers, teacher aides, security monitors, the resource officer, the principal, and the assistant principals.

The fifty students surveyed were both seventh and eighth graders. Their ages ranged between twelve and fourteen. There was a mix of special and regular education as well as gifted and talented students. The twenty-five teachers who were surveyed ranged in age between thirty to sixty years, with a minimum of three years teaching experience. Both special education and regular education teachers will be included. The majority of the teachers at the school have at least fifteen years of teaching experience. The two special education aides range in age between thirty-eight and forty-eight years old and their years of service are between ten and twenty years. The three security monitors range in age from thirty-five to sixty-five years old and their years of service vary between eight and twenty years. The resource officer aged thirty-seven, has been at the school for about eight months and prior to being hired worked on the local police force for ten years. The principal has been in the district for more than twenty years. The two assistant principals are in their second year of service as administrators.

Sampling Procedures

The type of sampling in this study was a non- random, purposive, sampling. The one group of students was chosen because they have had experience at the middle school and can base opinions on their last year. The other groups were chosen because they have specific

experience with safety issues on a daily basis. There are disadvantages to this type of sampling. Not everyone has an equal chance of participation. In other words the sample will not be representative of the population. The advantages to this type of sampling are that it is convenient for the researcher because the participants are easily accessible during the school year. Also, the participants should be more inclined to actively participate in the study because the researcher is someone they will see on a continuing basis. A disadvantage of purposive sampling is that the judgement of the researcher may not be totally accurate.

Research Design

The type of research conducted in this study was qualitative. It involved a survey for staff and administrators. The survey was administered once. The benefits of qualitative research include the ability of the researcher to obtain a holistic perspective of an issue because there is no set hypothesis or anticipated outcome. The researcher also has the opportunity to have direct contact with the people and the situation. There is flexibility in the design of qualitative research, assuming change is constant and ongoing, whether the focus is on an individual or an entire culture. Another benefit of qualitative research is that the steps are not sequential in the design; they often overlap or are conducted concurrently. The shortcomings of qualitative research are the possible bias on the part of the researcher and the lack of a clear, sequential process in the design. The researcher may be biased in the interpretation of the data and the process may sometimes be unclear.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

Ethical issues were managed by sending letters requesting permission from the superintendent and principal to conduct a survey (Appendices A and B). A statement of confidentiality will be attached to the survey (Appendix C).

Measures

In October 2001, a survey was distributed to 50 students, 28 staff members, and 3 administrators. This 20-question survey allowed for a large amount of data to be collected in a relatively short time period. There was also a section on the survey for added commentary.

All 50 student surveys were returned with 100% participation. 25 out of the 28 staff surveys were returned, giving an 89% response rate. All 3 administrators responded for a 100% response rate.

Data Analysis Strategies

The survey was recorded on a frequency table, which showed the response to each question. A table was selected because an estimate of the total population was desired. The data was then categorized as applicable to the research questions. Interview results and comments were analyzed. Comparative and contrastive data was recorded.

Results

There were a total of 78 surveys given to students, staff, and administrators. The response rates were as follows for each group: 50 student surveys were given and completed for 100% response rate. Of the 28 staff surveyed, 25 were completed for an 89% response rate. All three administrators were given a survey and 100% were completed. The results of the surveys were categorized in order to respond to the research questions.

Through Hallway to Classrooms: Students' Perceptions

94% of students reported in the survey that what happens in the hallways does have some effect on their learning. 56% of the surveys provided additional comments. The effects listed related to class disruption and loss of class time. However, 4% of the students reported that hallway climate has no impact on their learning; 2% were unsure if hallway climate impacted their learning.

While 98% of the students feel safe at the school, they also see a need for improvement in the traffic flow of the hallways. They also reported that bookbags cause problems and add to the crowdedness in the hall. In addition, 98% of students agreed that more supervision is needed in the common areas of the school.

Staff Perceptions

100% feels that the school environment is safe, but that the hallways are an area of safety concern for them. 80% provided additional comments. 92% feels that what happens in the hallway has an effect on their teaching and the students' learning. Effects on teaching included loss of time due to a carry over of what happened in the hall between students. 96% also sees the

bookbags as contributors to the congestion in the hallways. 100% sees a need for improvement of supervision in the common areas of the school.

Administrators' Perceptions

100% felt that the school was safe overall, but that common areas were a concern for them. They agreed that the hallways do have an effect on learning and teaching. They commented that navigating the halls was a big obstacle especially for seventh graders. Two of the three were certain that the bookbags caused problems and added to the congestion. Generally all three administrators agreed that the bookbag policy was an issue that needed further research.

Table 1

The Impacts of Safety on a School

Students		Staff		Administrators	
Hallway congestion	98%	Lack of supervision	100%	Hallway congestion	100%
Bookbags	95%	Hallway congestion	96%	Lack of supervision	100%
Lack of supervision	98%	Bookbags	100%	Bookbags	66%

Students' Strategies for Improvement

96% reported that they needed more time to get from class to class. They also wanted more time at the lockers between classes. 16% suggested putting more security personnel in every hallway of the school and in the common areas as well. 40% suggested a prohibition of bookbags, especially the type with the rolling wheels.

Staff Strategies for Improvement

92% overwhelmingly suggested a no bookbag policy, which would also allow more frequent locker visits to get books between classes. They reasoned that carrying the books would force the students to keep their hands to themselves and be better organized. They rationalized that the students would have to be more organized without the bookbag because they couldn't throw everything in it. 96% also suggested that administrators be out in the hallways and more visible to the students. 100% recognized the need for all fellow staff members to be present in the hallways. 96% suggested that administrators should discipline staff members who were not doing their part in hallway supervision.

Administrators' Strategies for Improvement

100% were in agreement about the need for improvement of hallway supervision. One of them agreed with the staff about a no bookbag policy, but the other two were not sure. They felt more research was needed on alternative solutions to bookbags.

Table 2

Suggested Strategies for Improvement

Students		Staff		Administrators	
Increase time between classes	96%	Every staff member perform duties appropriately	100%	Every staff member perform duties appropriately	100%
Increase security personnel	16%	Prohibit bookbags totally	100%	Further research needed on prohibition of bookbags	100%
Prohibit bookbags on wheels	40%	Increased administrative			

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Discussion of Findings

In this section, summary statements of the findings for each of the research questions will be provided. The first research question focused on what impact the hallway climate has on teaching and learning in the school. Ninety-four percent of students reported that congestion in the halls along with bookbags and a lack of supervision created an unsafe environment. The students also reported that incidents that occur in the halls affected or influenced their learning in the classroom. Not enough time between classes was reported as an issue for 98% of the students because they feel the need to rush or run in the halls, thus creating a safety hazard. Staff and administrators reported similar opinions about a lack of supervision in the halls and congestion in crowded halls with overloaded bookbags. The staff and administration agreed with 100% of both reporting that better supervision is needed and that something must be done to alleviate the flow of traffic in the halls.

The second research question asked students, staff, and administrators for strategies to make improvements in the school. Forty percent of the students recommended prohibiting rolling bookbags. Ninety-two percent of the staff recommended prohibiting bookbags altogether. The administrators were split; two wanted more research in the area and one recommended prohibition of bookbags. All three groups recommended more supervision. Sixteen percent the students suggested the hiring of more security guards. Ninety-six percent of the staff recommended more administrative presence was needed in the hall as well as every staff member should be on duty at their door between change of classes. One hundred percent of the administrators recommended every staff member should be on their post between changing of classes.

Limitations

This type of study had several limitations. First it was reliant upon people giving their truthful opinions. Some of the participants may have been influenced by other people's ideas. Secondly, the scope of the study concentrated on a smaller group that may not have been a true sample of the entire school population. There were 78 people surveyed out of a total of 1,150 people in the entire school. Thirdly, not all of the questions on the survey could be answered by all of the participants. The same survey was distributed to all of the participants. Some of the students had difficulty in answering some questions on the survey that applied to teaching. Each participatory group requires its own specific survey.

Analysis of the Findings

The research study attempted to answer two questions and create a list of strategies and recommendations. The first question asked about students, staff, and administrators' perceptions about what impact safety has on the learning process. The research study focused on the hallways because they are a common area of a school. Students, staff and administrators all agreed that the school was a safe place overall. All three groups did see the hallways as a potential safety concern. In the review of the literature, several sources supported the finding that the hallways are a major area of safety concern in a school (Blauvelt, 1999). All three participant groups saw a lack of supervision in the halls as a safety concern. The research supports this finding that hallway supervision is very important to school safety (Astor, 2001).

The second question of this study asked for recommendations for improvement strategies from the students, staff, and administration. Students recommended more time between each class. There was no research supporting this in the review of the literature. Students also recommended increasing security personnel in the halls. This suggestion was supported in the

literature by several sources (Tolan, 1994). Prohibiting bookbags was suggested by the students and was supported in the research as a proactive measure to keeping a school safe (Tolan, 2000).

The staff made some similar recommendations for prohibiting bookbags. Eliminating bookbags will reduce congestion and reduce injuries in the hallways (Comarow,1999). All groups agreed that more supervision in halls was needed and according to (Posner, 2000) it is an excellent way to promote school safety.

Two out of the three administrators wanted more research done to find out if eliminating bookbags would be possible and helpful. The administration as a whole, agrees that something needs to be done about the congestion in the halls created by bookbags. There has been a committee formed to further investigate the issue of bookbags and hallway safety.

Implications

The findings in this study have made a difference in the school. As a result of this research survey, a new committee has been formed at the middle school. The committee will continue the research with a more in depth survey and research into other school districts with this same problem that have successfully solved it. Because of this research, more awareness about safety issues has pushed to the forefront of the school agenda. This study has shown that hallway safety does affect the students' learning according to both students' and staff's perceptions. The implication of this knowledge is that now further research and studies must be done on it.

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Product Serial Number: CNCL002583
Service ID: 00000
Firmware Datecode: 20010214
PS Wait Timeout: 300 seconds

Memory

Total Memory: 16 MBytes
Available Memory: 12.78 MBytes

Installed Personalities and Options

PCL (19990105)
PCLXL (19990105)
PS (19990105)
DIMM Slot 1: Side 1: 8 MByte RAM DIMM
Side 2: Empty

Please Do Not Film

Page Counts

Total Pages Printed	= 3192
Pages Jammed in Printer	= 8
Pages Mispicked In Printer	= 9

Print Settings

COPIES	= 1
PAPER SIZE	= LETTER
WIDE A4	= NO
COURIER	= REGULAR
AUTO CONT	= OFF
ORIENTATION	= P (Portrait)
FORM	= 60 LINES
MANUAL FEED	= OFF
RET	= ON
ECONOMODE	= OFF
OPTIMIZE FOR	= MIDWEIGHT
PRINT DENSITY	= 3
FONT SOURCE	= 1 (Internal)
FONT NUMBER	= 0
PITCH	= 10.00
SYM SET	= PC-8
LINE TERM	= 0
PRT PS ERRS	= OFF
RESOLUTION	= 1200
BITS PER PIXEL	= 1
PERSONALITY	= AUTO
IO TIMEOUT	= 15
REPRINT	= AUTO

Fax:

E-mail: smithurz@aol.com

Date: June 17, 2002

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